

VZCZCXRO9335
PP RUEHCI
DE RUEHKA #6110/01 2771119
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 041119Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1918
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9356
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 8702
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1288
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7577
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0603
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0231
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 0594
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1522
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1057
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 006110

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/03/2011

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: INTER-PARTY DIALOGUE INCHES FORWARD

REF: DHAKA 6091

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia T. Butenis for reason para 1.4 d.

11. (C) Summary. After several false starts, the secretaries general of the two main parties are poised to meet in parliament to talk about talks on the upcoming election. There is little hope of a breakthrough as both parties remain wedded to hard-line positions, but the breathless press coverage of dialogue prospects the past week reflects broad Bangladeshi hopes for political reconciliation and a way out from feared high-levels of violence during the caretaker government. USG efforts to promote dialogue are generally welcomed as positive and bipartisan. End Summary.

12. (C) For the past week, Bangladesh media have featured Ambassador's efforts to encourage Mannan Bhuiyan, Secretary General of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party, and his opposition Awami League counterpart, Abdul Jalil, to talk and explore dialogue on obstacles to a successful election, including Awami League participation. Ambassador spoke and met on numerous occasions with Bhuiyan and Jalil, as well as senior figures in both parties, including Home Minister of State Babar for the BNP and Presidium member Kazi Zafarullah for the AL, to urge them forward.

13. (C) During a two-hour session on September 27 (reftel), AL president Sheikh Hasina asked Ambassador to host the two secretaries general to tea at the CMR as an alternative to

SIPDIS

the downtown Dhaka state guest house as originally proposed by the BNP and accepted by Jalil. Ambassador agreed, and the event was scheduled to follow her previously scheduled iftar dinner at the CMR, to which both secretaries general were invited, on October 3.

14. (C) Late October 2, however, Jalil, coming out of a meeting with senior party officials, informed the media of the CMR tea. At a special press conference called to give his response, Bhuiyan announced he would not attend the tea, objected that the AL was trying to "blackmail" the BNP by suggesting Bhuiyan must go to the CMR if the BNP wanted dialogue, and stated that although the U.S. is a great friend of Bangladesh, its help is not needed for political party dialogue. He added, though, that the BNP's offer of dialogue remained open and could take place at the state guest house or at parliament.

15. (C) The AL's Kazi Zafarullah told the Ambassador that one

positive development of this latest series of events was the BNP had now proposed parliament as a venue for talks, implying that this would be acceptable to the AL. On October 4, newspapers headlined the probability of AL-BNP talks at parliament, most likely after the current parliamentary session wraps up this evening.

16. (C) Senior figures of both parties have downplayed to us the likelihood of substantive talks, in some cases even characterizing them as mere political theater. The pending travel of the two party leaders, Hasina to the U.S. and PM Zia to Saudi Arabia, adds to the perception that no breakthroughs are in the offing.

17. (C) Although Foreign Minister Khan -- not a key decision-maker for the BNP -- has again publicly complained about foreign interference in Bangladeshi domestic affairs, public reaction to U.S. efforts to promote dialogue has been generally positive. "We're all scared about the security situation during the caretaker regime if there's not some kind of political settlement," a Bangladeshi academic guest noted at the Ambassador's iftar dinner. "Because you're showing yourselves to be neutral and that your interest is in the political process, people will support what you are doing."

18. (C) Comment: Both parties assure us they are open to dialogue and do not want their party to be seen as obstructionist. Thus far, though, the BNP has been a bit more proactive and less fixated on protocol to get something started, in part because it is prepared to pay a price -- probably the removal of the controversial chief election commissioner -- if the AL drops its other demands for electoral changes. But PM Zia and most of her key advisers are averse to public or formal negotiation with the AL

DHAKA 00006110 002 OF 002

because that would be seen, they say, as a sign of political weakness. Moreover, they believe, the Awami League is already boxed in by its own rhetoric and the daunting electoral arithmetic in favor of the ruling coalition. The AL, for its part, is wary of undercutting its central plank that only far-reaching electoral changes can undo massive BNP rigging and justify AL participation in the election. Leaking the CMR tea to the press was, the AL must have known, guaranteed to force the BNP to back out since the optics of international mediation of AL-BNP contacts are unacceptable to the ruling party. Trying to "internationalize" issues (such as the Kibria murder investigation) is a long-standing AL pressure and debating tactic against the BNP.

19. (C) The British High Commissioner has also been promoting inter-party dialogue and in early 2006 began a "back-channel" exchange between two senior figures from each party. However, it has taken the media, and the looming arrival of the caretaker government, to generate a public sense of urgency. While there is no reason to believe either party is ready for substantive negotiation, the hope is widespread that something positive -- even just a reduction of the rhetoric -- might emerge and that a mechanism for dialogue would be ready in case it is suddenly needed.
BUTENIS